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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001284

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO
ALSO FOR PM/FO A/S KIMMITT AND IO ACTING A/S WARLICK
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHDELBAUER
NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT
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LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI TO DAS HALE: ISRAEL HURTING US BY
OPENING DOORS FOR SYRIA, HELPING HIZBALLAH'S IMAGE

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Majority leader Saad Hariri told visiting NEA DAS David Hale that Israel is hurting the forces of moderation in Lebanon through actions such as agreeing to a prisoner swap with Hizballah, "opening doors" for Syrians as it negotiates with them and making threatening statements regarding Lebanon. He expressed concern, as he often has previously, that the U.S., France and others are not doing enough to counter the disruptive actions in Lebanon by Syria, Iran and Hizballah. His 2009 electoral campaign efforts will begin with numerous Iftars with his supporters and allies during Ramadan. End summary.

¶2. (C) Visiting NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale, accompanied by the Ambassador, DCM, and PolOffs, met with majority leader Saad Hariri at his residence in Qoreitem on August 31, hours after Hariri's return from vacation in Europe. Hariri advisor Nader Hariri and a notetaker also attended the meeting.

¶3. (C) This was the last meeting of DAS Hale's trip to Lebanon, and he conveyed to Saad some impressions from his trip and messages he had passed. U.S. support for Lebanon remains strong. Israel is concerned about unchecked arms flows from Syria and needs to see that there is action being taken to stop them; they do not now. The U.S. is skeptical about French efforts to negotiate with Syria, but expects to regroup with France regarding policy on Lebanon. The USG wants to use its assets to help the forces of moderation in Lebanon, particularly for the 2009 parliamentary election. Finally, Hale said, he had gotten a sense from several interlocutors that March 14 does not have a coherent election strategy.

"MY MAIN OBJECTIVE NOW: WIN THE ELECTIONS"

¶4. (C) Saad, sporting a deep tan from his vacation, said his main objective right now is the elections. March 14 can win easily if we "can be humble." Yes, there is a need for an electoral program, he said, but also the various partners of March 14 must lessen their personal ambitions and focus on

winning independent voters -- an apparent reference to his frequently feuding Christian partners in the coalition, Samir Geagea and Amine Gemayel. March 14 is in a better position than before, but it needs to overcome the obstacles caused by the ambitions of Geagea and Gemayal. For his own party, the Future Movement, Saad said he will be using Iftars during Ramadan to kick off the electoral campaign. Saad said he meets tens of thousands of supporters during the Iftars he hosts at Qoreitem and he promised that this year's will have some unique features which he did not want to reveal yet -- "stay tuned."

15. (C) This was Saad's first meeting with DAS Hale (who had known Saad's father, the late PM Rafiq Hariri), and he used it to convey his frequent complaint about the lack of international support for Lebanon or opposition to Syria's efforts to undermine stability in Lebanon. Among his concerns were that Syria is harboring terrorists; Lebanon is not important for the U.S., Europe or the Arab World; "The U.S. has no Syria policy;" and, there is no combined vision in the international community about dealing with Syria. The U.S. can do more than simply "not talk to them", he said. He found it worrisome that French president Sarkozy had felt it necessary to phone him to promise that the French, in their reengagement with Syria, would never retreat on the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, when Saad had never expressed any concern about it.

16. (C) The policy of Syria and its partner Hizballah is to keep Lebanon in conflict, Saad said, and the recent troubles in Tripoli involving Sunni Salafists reflect that. Saad

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expressed the concern that Syria will persuade the U.S., Europe and others that because of the continued instability in Tripoli and the north, Syrian troops must return to restore order. Saad did not deny, outright, that his Future movement has been supporting the Salafists. However, he did say that if he backed the Salafists he would be "ending" himself. Saad said that he would support LAF deployment to Tripoli, even though it would be "painful for me politically" with Sunni supporters. Supporting the LAF, he said, is an important way to show support for a strong central government.

PLANS FOR MORE MILITARY ASSISTANCE

17. (C) In addition, he went on, Lebanon needs more arms. Responding, the Ambassador told him of the August 27 visit of ASD Mary Beth Long intended to move forward on an expanded USG assistance program to the Lebanese Armed Forces. DAS Hale added that ASD Long had been clear that the USG would work to put expanded assistance programs in place now, so that the benefits could be seen before the 2009 elections. He added that while realistically, the 2009 parliamentary elections will not turn the tide against Hizballah, they provide an opportunity to show Lebanese citizens that closeness to Syria and Iran is not in their best interest.

18. (C) DAS Hale asked Saad's thoughts on UNSCR 1701. Again, Saad was downbeat about international support. He said that troop contributors to UNIFIL such as France are less tough with Syria than they might be out of fear about harm coming to their troops. The troops have become hostages for Syria, he lamented. To implement 1701, there needs to be a strong arms embargo on weapons crossing the border, which Syria has been consistently allowing.

ISRAELIS HURTING US WITH THEIR ACTIONS

19. (C) DAS Hale picked up on that and noted that if Lebanon does not do something on the weapons flow, Israel may feel compelled to take action. He was not passing any messages from the Israeli government, he said, but conveying

impressions he had from his stop there before arriving in Lebanon, particularly his conversations with Israeli military leaders. In response, Saad complained that Israelis are opening doors for Syria in Washington. "We destroyed" Hizballah's reputation in the Arab world after the Hizballah-led violence in Lebanon on May 7, but Israel had helped restore it with actions like the Hizballah-Israeli prisoner exchange. Saad also expressed concern about recent threatening rhetoric toward Lebanon from Israeli government officials. DAS Hale responded that the USG is talking to Israel about trying to help the forces of moderation in Lebanon. He reiterated strong U.S. support for our common goals in Lebanon and continued insistence on changes in Syrian behavior - changes that were unlikely to come from the "carrot only" approach of others.

COMMENT

11. (C) Saad seemed ready to begin 2009 electoral campaign work at least within his own party, the Fuure Movement. He may have intended that we would use his critical comments about his Christian partners in March 14 to persuade them to cooperate better. Saad's message on the situation in Lebanon was consistent with his usual downbeat view that the U.S. and international community are not taking the actions necessary to help against Syria's and Hizballah's efforts to keep Lebanon unstable. End Comment.

11. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.
SISON